

**Partnership for learning: Youth Exchange and Study Program
Pre-departure Orientation July 19, 2007**

Remarks

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Dr. Saidu Yakubu, teachers, students, parents - especially the parents – welcome to our pre departure orientation for these students who will be traveling to the U.S. as part of the Youth Exchange and Study Program.

My name is Henry Mendelsohn and I am a Cultural Attaché in the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy.

I am very excited and pleased to be here today to welcome you. I am excited because I know that you are all going to have a remarkable experience and I am pleased that we are able to help you travel to the U.S. to live with an American family in the state of Iowa.

When I was about your age my family hosted an exchange student from Uruguay in South America who lived with us for one year and I still remember how interesting it was for me and how much he enjoyed it.

The Department of State's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau in Washington, D.C. launched the Partnership for Learning: Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program in 2003.

The objective of the program in Nigeria is to provide young Nigerian students an opportunity to enhance their understanding of the American society, its people, institutions, values and culture. The students will be in the U.S. for one academic year. We hope that during this year they will develop leadership skills, new friendships and a better understanding of America and its way of life.

Not only Nigerians participate in this program. Students in the 2003-04 programs came from 14 countries including Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirate, West Bank/Gaza and Yemen. The profile of students in 2005-06 included youths from Algeria, West Bank, Gaza, Iraq, Israel (Arab community), Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Malaysia, Philippines, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and India.

The Success Story

Since its inception, over 80 Nigerian high school students and 8 teachers have participated in the program.

During the first year students and teachers from Kaduna and Sokoto States participated on the program. These two states were initially chosen because of their strategic position and complex dynamics as the former capital of northern Nigeria and the seat of the Sokoto Caliphate.

In 2005, the program was expanded to include Plateau and Taraba States. In 2006 Bauchi was added to the list. At first Bauchi sent only boys but now include girls too.

Due to Nigeria's special case, where relations between Christians and Muslims has deteriorated in recent years, a few Christians students and teachers were incorporated into the program to expose both sides to religious tolerance in the United States.

Parents: I bet you are worried. I have a 12 year old son and I'd be worried too and I can't even begin to tell you how upset my wife would be if he went to live with a strange family in another country. So, while it is OK to worry I want to assure you your children will be well looked after and that they will have a tremendous enriching experience that will allow them to grow and develop and I hope help them realize their full potential as sons and daughters of Nigeria. I think your children are going to benefit immensely from their year in the U.S.

People from Iowa are great Americans. Iowa is in what we call our heartland. Iowa is an agricultural state with rich soil and down to earth people. It is also culturally diverse and has a large Muslim population. In fact the capitol of Iowa, Des Moines, is home to one of America's first mosques. Indeed you will find mosques and Islamic Centers in all the 4 cities where your children will live, and for the students who are Christian, you will any number of churches that you can attend.

From the academic aspect, four YES alumni have secured admission to the U.S. colleges. Many of them have also completed the secondary certificate exam with excellent result and are studying in Nigerian universities. For all of them, life will never be the same again. They have become role models within their communities, represented their families, schools, and country creditably in the U.S, and gained exposure that will help them throughout their lives.

Before I went overseas for the first time I received a bit of advice I've never forgotten and would like to pass on to you - be open minded, be flexible, and above all, have a sense of humor: That may be hard to understand now at your age but I hope that by the time you come home you will be more open minded, more flexible in your approach to life, and have an even better sense of humor – if that is possible for Nigerians who seem to me to already have great senses of humor.

And of course there is a Nigerian proverb that says – and please forgive my pronunciation:

"TA-FI-YAH MA-BU-DIN IL-MI" meaning "TRAVEL IS A KEY TO KNOWLEDGE"

And now there are several more people who are going to talk to you and give you an opportunity to ask questions at the end.

Thank you for coming today and congratulations for being selected to embark on this wonderful adventure and journey.